THE ROLE OF GENDER IN AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS' MENTAL HEALTH

Delgado, A; Cortiñas, A

Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de São João, Porto

1% is the percentage of population that's affected by autism spectrum Disorders (ASD);

4:1 boys:girls is the ratio that is mentioned in the published literature – however studies show that this proportion may be lower: **2.0-2.6:1**.

FEMALES

ASD females show a **greater self-awareness, greater effort to camouflage the deficits and greater determination to learn social norms and nuances** than ASD males.

ASD females are at risk of receiving non-spectrum classification in ADOS while their developmental history and clinical manifestation confirms ASD;

'female autism phenotype'

Social Camouflaging

use of strategies to present a less visibly autistic persona to others during a social interaction

learning 'scripts' for regular social interactions
developing techniques to mask the appearance of autism

reducing discrimination
smoothing social interactions
achieving success in employment or education

Frequently reported consequences of camouflaging are **exhaustion, loss of identity and mental health difficulties**

Sex Differences

Neuroendocrine function

High levels of **fetal testosterone** may predispose boys to have "**extreme male brains**," characterized by phenotypes involving elevated "systematizing" versus "empathizing".

Higher levels of **oxytocin**, which encourage **nurturance** and **affiliation**, provide **protection** in girls against the development of autistic traits;

At the **biological** level females with ASD show different profiles in:

- Serum biomarkers;
- Genetics;
- Neuroanatomy;
- Early brain overgrowth.

'Gender paradox' hypothesis

The **least** frequently affected sex is **more severely impaired**;

Females require a **higher genetic/environmental load** to be affected;

Lower genetic variability in females - are more likely to be affected in cases where there is a pathological event.

Mental Health

ASD males appear to be at greater risk for co-occurring **ADHD, obsessive-compulsive disorder** and **tics**.

The most frequent diagnosis prior diagnosis for males is **ADHD** and **oppositional defiant disorder**

Females appear to be at greater risk for developing **anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and psychiatric hospitalization** than ASD males.

Depression and anxiety are most frequent **prior** diagnosis for females before they receive ASD diagnosis

ASD females present **clinically much later** (three and a half years) and are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder over and a half years later than ASD males.